

Checking Parts of Speech

When you parse sentences or do inflectional morphology, one of the first tasks is to assign every word or stem to an appropriate part of speech. There are two ways to check, one for finding Nouns, Verbs, and Adjectives, and the other for remaining categories.

1. Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives

These are so-called “open-class” categories, meaning that the language readily accepts new ones (in borrowings, slang, advertising, etc.). They each have thousands of members. The ways to diagnose these parts of speech are as follows.

1.1 Semantics

A *very rough* way of getting part of speech is the traditional one based on meaning.

- a noun designates a thing¹: *boy, sincerity, soup, method*
- a verb designates an action: *jump, think, exist, elapse*
- an adjective designates a quality: *green, sincere, former*

This method is tricky, since there are nouns that, at least in one sense, designate actions, such as *announcement, portrayal*, and so on.

1.2 Diagnostic frames

The other method is to use *diagnostic frames*; that is, particular contexts that only permit a verb, or noun, or adjective, to occur.

- Anything that can occur in the frame
“*I admire the ____.*”
(like *truth, furniture, soup*) is a noun.
- Anything that can occur in the frame
“*She decided to ____.*”
(like *leave, cogitate, elapse*²), is a verb.
- Anything that can occur in the frame:

¹ Traditionally, “person, place, or thing”, but of course people and places are things...

² The sentence may be nonsensical; the important part is whether it is grammatical.

“the one ___ thing”

(like *important, green, inanimate*) is an adjective.

Once you’ve experimented with these frames, you can probably think up many others.

2. Other parts of speech

The nice aspect of the other parts of speech is that they are *closed-class* words. This means, first, that there aren’t all that many of them. More important, they constitute a complete list, which cannot be added to (except by the long-term process of grammar change). So, if all else fails, you could just memorize these words. The method of diagnostic frames is also applicable in some cases.

Note that the following is not a general list, but only the function words that would be used in the mini-grammar used in this course.

Articles

a, the, this, that, these, those, which, what

These always begin a Noun Phrase, as in *a book, that long article, what news*. A diagnostic you can use is that no Noun Phrase can have more than one article. So, **the this book* shows that *this* is an Article.

Auxiliary verbs

be (am, was, are, were, is), have (has, had),³ can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might⁴

Diagnostic: only Auxiliary verbs may appear before the subject in a question: *Will you eat the ice cream?* vs. **Ate you the ice cream?*

Prepositions

of, to, for, from, in, on, about, above, below, over, under, around, between, against, before, after, up, down

Together with a following Noun Phrase, these form Prepositional Phrases (*of the book, against reason, before the mast*).

³ *be* and *have* can also be verbs, as in *He will be here, She might have measles*.

⁴ Older English had *dare* and *durst*: “What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry” (William Blake, “The Tiger”, 1794).

Complementizers⁵

that, if, whether

These introduce subordinate clauses (sentences inside sentences). Examples: *She said that she was going, I wonder if you are going, I wonder whether you are going.*

Pronouns

Nominative	Objective ⁶	Genitive
<i>I</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>my</i>
<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>your</i>
<i>he</i>	<i>him</i>	<i>his</i>
<i>she</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>her</i>
<i>it</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>its</i>
<i>we</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>our</i>
<i>they</i>	<i>them</i>	<i>their</i>

this, that, these, those, who, what

Pronouns can occur alone as Noun Phrases, generally don't take modifiers, and stand for something else identifiable from the context.

⁵ Also: *for*, in constructions like *I would prefer for you to win.*

⁶ Objective is a case which combines the functions of Accusative and Dative. English makes no distinction between Accusative and Dative, so it is sensible to use the term Objective.